

Called By Name

John 20:1-18

Easter (2011)

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?"

Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said all these things to her.

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Welcome to worship. I am glad that each of you is here. I am also a little curious about how 700 of you managed to park your car, find an entrance, and get in the building. In case you haven't noticed, we are under construction. We are going through some needed change. It is good change, but we're still getting used to it.

In the midst of change, it is nice to have some things that you can count on. When it comes to our church facility, our building, about the only thing that hasn't changed (and I almost mean this literally) is this pulpit. First Pres Shreveport has been around for 166 years, and soon after it was founded, the church built and used this pulpit in worship.

You can't see it now, but right here the wood is worn down and the varnish has worn off. You see, this is where you hold on to the pulpit when you lean over to make an important point.

I've been doing a lot of thinking about this pulpit this week. I want you to consider, in 166 years, how many people have stood here, gripping on for dear life, while they tried to talk about the grace of God. Children, teenagers, elders, preachers...all of them wearing down the sides of this lectern with the sweat of their palms.

As far as I know, this is the 166th Easter sermon preached from this pulpit. I can't imagine what else can be said. I am sure some Easter sermons focused on the differences between the four gospels in the way they tell the resurrection story. Some sermons probably challenged the congregation to go – like the women at the tomb – and share the good news. Others may have stressed the importance of living like Easter people we are. More than likely, some sermons caused people sitting in the pews to fall asleep, others to be inspired, others to be moved to tears.

But not one sermon...not one in 166 years...not one sermon preached from this pulpit on Easter morning was (or will be) able to prove what we say happened early on that first day of week while it was still dark.

The central tenant of our faith – the event that makes us Christians – is an affirmation that the tomb was empty. That Jesus was raised. That Jesus is alive.

But you can't prove it. That's why the church calls it a confession of faith. All you can do is believe it. Then, it will change your life, and, indeed, the world.

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All over the world today, churches are packed to the gills with people wearing uncomfortable clothes. I guess you could be cynical and say that the pews are fuller than usual because children (young and old) are finally minding their mothers and fathers when they wag their fingers and say "we better see you at church." Or, maybe it is because there is still a cultural pressure to show up on Easter. Or, maybe seeing chocolate Easter eggs for the past three months at the grocery store did the trick.

But I don't think that is it. I think churches are more full than normal today because people need the Easter message to be true. I think they are counting on it to make sense of life.

Early on the first day of this week, while it was still dark, a family in Sendai City, Japan woke up to be reminded – once again – of their never-ending nightmare. Their house contains empty beds where loved ones used to sleep. And this morning, instead of reading the paper and going to their places of employment, they will pull on their work gloves and resume the clearing of rubble left in the tsunami's wake.

Early on the first day of this week, while it was still dark, a husband woke up next to his wife who was dying. The doctors said there was nothing else they could do but keep her comfortable. Soon, he will demonstrate his love and commitment to her by getting up, making her hot tea and toast and crawling back into bed beside her so they can be together.

Early on the first day of this week, while it was still dark, a teenager woke up, scared and wishing he was still asleep. He is tired of being bullied for the ways he doesn't fit in. He is exhausted by spending his weeks at school trying to be invisible.

Early on the first day of this week, while it was still dark, a woman woke up with a secret. She always seems like she has it together – perfect children, perfect marriage, perfect physique – but, really, she is broken. She is

hurting. And she doesn't know why. So each morning she spends a little more time finding the energy to hide the pain.

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It was still dark in the early morning on the first day of that week when Mary Magdalene came to the tomb. We aren't told why she decided to go. Perhaps it was the way she needed to work out her grief. Sometimes visiting the grave can help. Maybe it was because she didn't know what else to do. Her hope for a better world had died with Jesus on the cross.

What we can deduce is that Mary did not go to the tomb expecting it to be empty. And clearly, seeing that it was, she could not allow herself to imagine that God could work beyond the limits of her expectations. A stone rolled back and the tomb empty meant one thing: that someone had taken Jesus' body away. It was just one more disappointment in an already devastating week.

Mary went to tell the other disciples. Two of them raced to confirm the news. Yes, the tomb was empty. No, Jesus' body was not there.

But it was not yet Easter.

Mary lingered at the tomb after the two disciples went back home. She wasn't ready to face the reality of a world without Jesus. Seeing the empty tomb was one thing, but she still needed an explanation.

It was not yet Easter.

Then two strangers showed up – strangers being God's preferred brand of messengers. Then another stranger; one who Mary thought to be a gardener. Finally, through her grief and through her tears, she heard the gardener call her by name. Jesus said, "Mary."

And it was Easter.

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We often think that faith principally consists of knowledge. Of possessing truth. Teaching it. Defending it. Demonstrating why our brand is better than their brand.

But, you see, at its heart, faith isn't about knowing.
It is about being known.¹

The way the gospel of John tells it – it wasn't Easter until the risen Christ spoke Mary's name. Up until that point, that morning was an intellectual exercise, leaving those disciples who saw the empty tomb left to guess what it meant for their faith.

But Mary, standing there with the light in her lamp of hope snuffed out – believing that darkness and chaos had won – Mary received a gift. Her Lord and friend stood before her and called her by name. And with one word, Mary's faith was set free to hope, and dream, and endure past the place she thought possible. Not because of what she knew...but because she finally understood that she was known – personally, intimately – by a God, once dead, now alive, who was not yet finished working his purposes out.

Have you ever experienced the joy of hearing someone lovingly call your name?

Your spouse or partner – who knows you better than you know yourself?

Your child or grandchild who thinks you've hung the moon?

Your life-long friend who has seen you through it all?

If you have experienced it, you know the grace and the power of being known.

In the earliest of churches, founded by those who were not too far removed from the experience of the resurrection, it was the practice to allow people to join community of faith on one day of the year. On that day, the church would gather in worship where new believers would be baptized. The leader of the church would call each person by name, "Mary, child of the covenant; Peter, child of the covenant; Elizabeth, child of the covenant" and then, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

And it was Easter.

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¹ Palmer, Parker, *To Know As We Are Known* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983) p. 60.

Listen: I don't pretend to know all the reasons why you are here today – on this Easter. There will always be questions. Never can we fully understand the resurrection promise central to our life of faith. But before you leave here, to go back home, to your lives, to your work, to face the world of what you think is possible – remember this: you are known, and loved, and redeemed, by a God who has brightened every tomorrow and defeated even death.

By a God who is still working God's purposes out for the world that God loves.

By a God who knows you and calls you by name.

Christ is risen.
He is risen indeed.
Alleluia!
Amen.

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